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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER
MICHEL BARNIER

Classified By: Classified by POL MinCouns Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Ambassador Stapleton met on February 6 with Michel Barnier, former foreign minister (2004 - 2005) and now Senior Foreign Affairs advisor to Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) presidential nominee Nicolas Sarkozy. Barnier addressed the state-of-play in the French presidential campaign and France's post-election foreign policy priorities. Barnier said that the top priorities of a Sarkozy administration's foreign policy would be to re-invigorate the EU Constitutional process and push for concerted U.S.-EU engagement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Barnier will be in Washington February 12 - 13 and has requested a meeting with the Secretary. End Summary.

Traveling to Washington February 12 - 13

¶2. (C) Barnier led off the breakfast with a request for help getting a meeting with Secretary Rice during his visit to Washington February 12 - 13. A meeting with the Secretary has already been requested by Ambassador Levitte in Washington. Comment: The Ambassador believes such a meeting could prove a good investment, should Sarkozy win the presidential election and Barnier land a senior position in it. Barnier has an outside chance of being named foreign minister in a Sarkozy administration. End Comment.

Re-Invigorating the EU Constitutional Process

¶3. (C) Barnier accompanied Sarkozy to London to meet with Prime Minister Blair on January 30. Sarkozy, according to Barnier, sounded out Blair about ways to bridge the gap between what the 18 countries that ratified the EU constitutional treaty have agreed to, and the "minimalist" constitutional arrangements preferred by the UK. Barnier said "only French leadership" could bring together "these two visions of Europe." Barnier said that Sarkozy has many times presented his desire for a "simplified, functional treaty reflecting the necessary points of the constitution." Barnier made clear that he believes that a new treaty including all provisions from Parts 1 and 2 of the failed Constitution, but omitting Part 3, would be acceptable to all of the member states. When reminded that the 18 member states who ratified the treaty have explicitly rejected such a premise, Barnier dismissed the observation, saying that they will simply "be forced" to accept this solution by the

"very obvious" need for a strong EU, one that can be an equal of, and partner to, the U.S. He returned many times to the theme that a strong EU is in the interest of the U.S. "The U.S. needs strong, credible allies. If the EU is soft, then our alliance is soft. If the EU is weak, the U.S. is weak."

14. (C) Should the push for a truncated, institutional -- as opposed to the full-fledged, constitutional -- treaty fail, then, in Barnier's view, the only alternative to a dysfunctional 27 member EU, is what he called a "political Schengen." He said he meant by this a "core group" of EU states pursuing ever greater political union among themselves, "in parallel" to (and faster than) the larger EU consolidation process.

Now in Favor of "Partnership" for Turkey

15. (C) Barnier acknowledged that "I had to change my position" with regard to Turkey's EU accession. "I strongly supported it," Barnier said, pointing out with evident regret how Sarkozy's position against Turkey's inclusion had prompted Barnier to now, like Sarkozy, favor "some sort of partnership with Europe" for Turkey. Claiming that the U.S., by supporting Turkish accession to the EU, had played a role in the failure of the Constitutional referendum in France in May 2005, Barnier nonetheless blamed Turkey for the scuttling of its own accession chances. He argued that Turkey's own over-weening insistence on "getting a date" to open accession negotiations gave anti-constitution forces in France a "major campaign issue," which soon snowballed into the current closed ranks in French public opinion against Turkey's membership in the EU.

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Middle East To Be Top Priority

16. (C) Barnier underlined that "we cannot be spectators in the Middle East," before launching into a review of conflicts in the region -- all of which, he insisted, required concerted, joint U.S. and EU action to resolve. Barnier said he had just returned from trips to Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. "This is a very dangerous moment in the region -- all the warning lights are blinking red," he said. Nonetheless, his meetings in Saudi Arabia, he said, reinforced his view that there is a now a "window of opportunity" for engineering, even "imposing, if necessary" a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Barnier believes that "establishment of a Palestinian state" would go a long way towards defusing the region's other conflicts because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the "point on which all extremists in the Middle East are fixated." Comment: Barnier was expressing the unitary view of France's foreign affairs establishment, including the MFA -- that the conflicts in the Middle East are all centripetally driven by the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. End Comment.

17. (C) Barnier asserted that weak leadership on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide -- Abbas on the Palestinian side, Olmert on the Israeli side -- create a moment ripe for a concerted, coordinated U.S.-EU engagement to, if need be, "force" a solution on the parties. Arguing that the U.S. "had done nothing" to help resolve this conflict for six years, Barnier pushed for "serious" U.S. engagement. Reminded by the Ambassador, Barnier acknowledged the recent diplomatic efforts by Secretary Rice focused on breaking the current impasse between Israel and the Palestinians.

18. (C) Barnier repeatedly insisted on the necessity of a combined U.S.-EU push to re-energize the Middle East Peace Process; only such a committed and coordinated effort could "force" the parties to a settlement. Barnier said that Europe should take the lead in creating a UNIFIL-like structure that would be necessary to policing a settlement, though he volunteered no details for a proposed settlement

that would require such "an interposing force."

¶9. (C) Barnier raised the issue of Iran only briefly. He said that he "sensed a major risk of U.S. military action" against Iran in the "next two to three months." The Ambassador reminded Barnier that President Bush told Sarkozy, when Sarkozy visited Washington last fall, that military action against Iran is a last recourse that is not now under consideration. Barnier asserted that the Iranian opposition is maturing, and time is needed for the Iranian people to "stand up" and reject Ahmadinejad. Sanctions, which Sarkozy supports, are only just beginning to work, Barnier added.

The French Presidential Election

¶10. (C) According to Barnier, Socialist nominee Segolene Royal's current decline in the polls presages Sarkozy's election, moving it "from a possibility to a probability." Barnier went over Sarkozy's strengths -- building "the first truly formidable center-right party in France," thoroughly preparing himself, and having put in place a "professional" campaign organization. He nonetheless called for caution in calling the race this soon. "France wants change," he said, and Royal, in her person and her campaign style, represents change -- "perhaps most when she doesn't speak," he added acerbically. Royal will roll out her platform, officially, on February 11, and Barnier said the ten days following that will be critical for her. In Barnier's view, if, by then, she has not bounced back 3-4 points in the polls, she can be counted out. Sarkozy has polled above 30 percent for many months, and "has a solid base of support that is going nowhere."

¶11. (C) Barnier also commented on third party candidacies, particularly those of Francois Bayrou of the centrist Union for French Democracy (UDF), and Jean-Marie Le Pen of the far-right National front (FN). He pointed out that Le Pen has not yet collected the 500 signatures of elected officials required to get his name on the ballot, and may not ultimately succeed in this effort. Such a failure worries Barnier for two reasons: without a Le Pen candidacy, his bloc of votes would become a highly unpredictable factor in the first round, and the backlash effect of Le Pen's absence from the ballot would drive an active and successful campaign

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by the far-right in the legislative elections which follow the presidential balloting. Barnier pointed out that a candidate who made it to the second round in 2002 (as did Le Pen) ought to be able to stand for election in the next election in a democratic country.

¶12. (C) As for Bayrou, Barnier singled him out as the candidate that will continue to climb in the polls. Barnier called Bayrou "a solid, serious person with strong credentials." "His pronouncements have the force of logic and experience, Barnier added. Furthermore, Barnier pointed out that Bayrou plays on the public's desire to buck expectations. He observed that the press and opinion-making elite present Sarkozy versus Royal as the only real contest, and many French voters would like to prove that presumption wrong. Bayrou plays skillfully on this desire. As examples of this contrarian streak in French political behavior, Barnier cited the "no" vote on the EU Constitution in 2004, then-prime minister Jospin's failure to reach the presidential run-off in 2002, and then-mayor of Paris Chirac's sidelining of the highly popular then-prime minister Balladur in the first round of the 1995 presidential race.

Bio Notes and Comment

¶13. (C) Barnier, as a former foreign minister, is one of the Sarkozy camp's most senior foreign affairs figures. Barnier would like to go back to being foreign minister in a Sarkozy administration, but a destiny in Brussels (on the EU

Commission that takes office in 2009, for example) is more likely for him. That said, Barnier remains (according to Francois Fillon, a leading candidate for prime minister in a Sarkozy administration) "third on the list" for the foreign ministry job. The two leading contenders, according to Fillon, are Bayrou and former foreign minister (and PM) Alain Juppe.

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